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A FEW NOTES ON "THE HARROWING OF HELL"

In his paper on "The Harrowing of Hell" (Vol. XVI, Part II, *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*) Professor Karl Young has rendered a distinct service to the student of liturgical drama. The texts which he there offers in a series conforming to the various stages in the development of the Harrowing of Hell theme in connection with the Easter office, as well as his introductory and concluding remarks, have given a new stimulus to the investigations in this part of the liturgical field. All the more, then, it is to be regretted that Professor Young does not reach a definite conclusion. And this seems to be due to the fact that he overlooked two points of especial significance in this connection: (1) the importance of the Great Sabbath, the day before Easter, in connection with this theme; (2) the evidence of the liturgical element in the later vernacular plays. Without attempting a detailed discussion of this subject at this time, I nevertheless venture the following suggestions:

Professor Young says that a conclusion which would accept the Harrowing of Hell scene in the liturgical drama as an adaptation from the vernacular would be hazardous. This seems to me a far too mild expression for the point in question. Such a conclusion would appear extremely improbable at the very outset, since we know the position of the clergy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in regard to extra-ecclesiastical plays. Besides, the liturgical tags in the later vernacular plays, especially those in the German language, present sufficient evidence in refutation of such a conclusion. See, for example, the "Alsfelder Spiel," *Z.d.A.*, III, 477 ff. Without, therefore, going into the evidence offered by the texts of the *Munich Breviary*, the *Cologne Agenda*, the *Processional of St. John of Dublin*, the *Rawlinson MS*, the *Benedictine Ordinal of the Nuns of Barking*, the *Bamberg Agenda*, the *Sacerdotale and Obsequiale of Eichstätt*, I sought another avenue of approach, the emphasis upon which had been strengthened by Professor Craig's suggestions in his paper on "The Old Testament Plays."

The position of the "Descent into Hell" in the *Church Year* is a matter of the history of liturgy and dogmatics. As early as the fourth century, Athanasius, the "Pater Orthodoxiae," used the argument of the "Descent" in defense of the doctrine of the true humanity in Christ. The first official statements of the descent into hell were formulated in 359 and 360, at the Synods of Sirmium in Pannonia, Nicae in Thrace, and Constantinople. A few decades later the doctrine is found in the confessions of the church of Aquileia.

Since the earliest days, the Great Sabbath had been celebrated with special solemnity (see *Apostolic Constitutions*; Lactantius, *Instit.* VII, 19; Jerome *ad Matth.* XXV, 6). Since Epiphanius (403), the time of Christ's descent was fixed as the night before Easter. In a homily (published by W. Dindorf, Leipzig, 1859-62, ascribed to Polybius) he describes with dramatic vividness how the Lord broke down the portals of hell, overcame the spirits of darkness, and then in the company of thousands of angels led the believers of the Old Testament, beginning with Adam, out of limbus to paradise. Whether his source was the *Evangelium Nicodemi* (whose date is now conceded to be not earlier than the fourth century) is of no consequence here. Since that time the descent was commemorated on the Great Sabbath, and homilies in defense of the doctrine were read on that day (cf. Alt, *Kirchlicher Gottesdienst*, 573). Moreover, since the earliest times the descent theme had a prominent place in the liturgy of the Great Sabbath. In an old hymn of that day the passages occur: "Haec nox est, in qua destructis vinculis mortis Christus *ab infernis* Victor ascendit.—O vere beata nox, quae sola meruit scire tempus et horam, in qua Christus *ab infernis* resurrexit."

In the *Liber Sacramentorum* of Gregory the Great the *Praefatio in Sabbato Sancto* contains the following reference to Christ: "qui inferorum claustra dirumpens, victoriae suae clara vexilla suscepit, et triumphato diabolo, victor a mortuis resurrexit" (*MPL*, 78, col. 91). In the *Liber Responsalis* of Gregory the Great the Antiphons and Responses of the first Nocturn of that day treat of the Death and Burial of Christ, those of the second and third principally of the Descent and Planctus, while the Matins and Vespers take up the Planctus and the Easter Story. Among the Antiphons

of the second Nocturn occurs first in order the "Elevamini, portae aeternales, et introibit Rex gloriae"; and immediately after that "Domine, abstraxisti ab inferis animam meam" (*MPL*, 78, col. 768).

It should be noted also that the liturgical responses in the later liturgical plays present a very striking similarity to a dramatic sermon of Augustine on the Descent (*MPL*, 39, col. 2059 ff.), while the subject is treated at length by the same man and mention made of the fathers who were saved from limbus by Christ in a homiletic Epistola (*MPL*, 33, col. 711 f.). The sermon published by Mr. Rand (*Mod. Phil.*, II) would not seem to have nearly the same value as evidence in this connection, because it is a Good Friday homily. Another fact that should not be overlooked is this, that in the *Egerer Spiel* there is an awakening of Christ in the grave after the Setting of the Watch before the Harrowing of Hell, which precedes the Resurrection.

There is no doubt then that the germ of the Harrowing of Hell play was contained in the liturgy and had as its nucleus the "Tollite Portas" Antiphon. The development most probably took place in two directions. In one case the scene remained a part of the Great Sabbath ceremonies, as we see in the "Ordo of Ruswil," *Z.d.Ph.*, XVIII, 459. In this instance the procession, which had formerly taken place about midnight, was merely set forward to nine o'clock. In the other case the nucleus of the Great Sabbath Descent liturgy became the introductory scene of the Resurrection drama by a deliberate change, and was placed in the new Ordines just before Matins on Easter morning. This was undoubtedly due to the powerful dramatic appeal of the story and its favor with the laity. The *Augsburg Ritual*, as well as those mentioned above, shows the later development of this growth. See Alt, *Das Kirchenjahr*, 364.

The arguments advanced above are, I think, fully substantiated by the liturgical tags in the German passion plays even down to the earliest one, which Bartsch (*Germ.*, VIII, 273) places at the beginning of the thirteenth century. In this there occurs a Harrowing of Hell scene with the Antiphon "Advenisti Desiderabilis." At any rate, the above aphoristic suggestions would seem to be worth investigating thoroughly.

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